

Today is the Sunday we set aside ages ago to talk about giving. By coincidence, the Gospel reading set for today is also about giving. “Give to the emperor that which belongs to the emperor and give to God what belongs to God.” Doesn’t sound as nice as “Render unto Caesar...” but the meaning’s the same.

Back in January the PCC agreed a policy document on the subject of Planned Giving. This is what it says.

*Compared to many, St. Andrew’s church is in a fairly sound financial situation. At present the church account is subsidised considerably by the church hall. It is not unusual for churches not to be able to pay their parish share and to have to look to other sources of income. There is nothing wrong with income from hall hire contributing to our parish share. We are not in a bad situation financially and there is no immediate cause for concern. However we would like to see the church fund become substantially self-sufficient and not have to rely on hall hire profits. We recognise that this is a long term aim. We wish to encourage serious engagement with the idea of Christian stewardship and to have mechanisms in place which will, in an appropriate way, encourage all committed members of St. Andrew’s, including newcomers, to think, reflect and pray about their response at a regular interval.*

And that’s a fair summary of where we are financially as a church. Having been more wisely governed in the past it would seem than most countries of the Western world, we are not in debt but solidly in the black. Our accounts are encouraging, and let me take this opportunity to thank, on all our behalf, our treasurer, Eric Aspden, who keeps the PCC very well-informed about the state of the church’s finances, and Peter Asquith who looks after the scheme of planned giving to the church in complete confidentiality.

But as that quote from the policy document states, the church is constantly and substantially propped up by income from the rent of the church hall. Without it we would have been broke long ago. And while it is allowed for a church to have other sources of income, really ideally income from hall lettings should be spent on maintaining and improving the hall. As it is, the new windows last year, for example, came out of reserves. One also wonders how churches which do not have a hall to hire keep their heads above water. If Caversham Heights cannot pay for its own church, how can anywhere? The answer to that is that they don’t, and the church closes or is absorbed into another parish, *unless* the people of those parishes support their church financially in a way that can only be described as sacrificial.

But we have no need to be gloomy. And the fact that we would like to see more income from giving by church members is not a basis upon which I can preach, because how much each of us gives is something we each have to decide for ourselves and is between you and God. In any case, a quick calculation shows that the average giving of regular worshippers at St. Andrew’s is something like £8 per person per week, which is not an insignificant amount. Of course that is an average and although I don’t know who gives how much, I do know that, as in every church, a large majority is paid by a small minority. Still, that figure sounds to me as if St. Andrew’s people have definitely grasped the principle that a church costs something. (It’s amazing how many people who perhaps aren’t churchgoers still seem to think that the church is paid for by the government, or that it is hugely wealthy and only seeks to raise funds because it is insatiably greedy!) So, we can be positive. There is a healthy culture of giving here, and although we might like, in time, to see the church financially self-sufficient, we can be thankful for the supportive community of which we are part.

What I feel I can legitimately preach about is along the lines of the words of Jesus in today's reading. He also chose not to engage with the direct, explicit question about what one should be expected to pay (although in this case it was about tax). He goes deeper. He suggests that the coins are Caesar's because they bear his image, and so when he says that we should give to God what is God's, his hearers will all understand what that means. The Hebrew scriptures say that God created human beings "in his image"- that we bear the image of God- just as a denarius bears the image of Caesar. You can give Caesar coins, but give to God that which bears his image, that is, your very self, all that you are and all that you have.

Jesus does not give a simple answer to one of the ethical dilemmas facing Jews of his day. He doesn't say do pay, or don't pay, or how much. He can only remind his questioners of the deeper issue, that we are to give to God not this or that but our very selves, and all else follows from that. This doesn't magically answer every question we have, but it is the context in which a person of faith must grapple with hard decisions. In the same way, I feel I can never teach anything very specific about giving to the church or to charity, except to say that God wants us to give to him our very selves, all that we are and all that we have. I believe God invites us to join in in the building of his kingdom, seeking a better world. In the words of one of the prayers we use often at morning prayer on weekdays "that we may strive for the well-being of all creation". Or in a more well-known prayer, "Thy kingdom come". This is the invitation, the life-giving command of God, to align every aspect of our lives with God's purposes.

So I don't know what anyone gives to the church or to charity. We live in relatively hard economic times. That affects some more

than others. I would not even preach tithing as a hard and fast rule, as some churches do, the command found in some parts of the Bible to give a tenth of all you earn to God. But I will say that I would prefer not to have any holidays than to stop giving money to Christian Aid, which was set up by the churches of Britain, and who continue to serve the very poorest of our world. How can I enjoy being on holiday if I'm not doing at least *something* to help people starving, not so very far away? It's not about giving God money, but giving God ourselves.

Or to put it differently and use that other word "Stewardship", the idea that what you have is not actually yours but God's. You hold your possessions and any wealth that you have in trust, as a steward. Can I invite you for a moment to shut your eyes... and just think for a moment of where you live, of what you own, of what you have in the bank, or invested in some way, of your financial security... and as you think about those things, picture them in your mind's eye, and think "not mine, but God's". "Not mine, but God's"./ He doesn't give us a set of rules. He calls us to be good and wise stewards.

As an aside, can I mention legacies? I know that many people would like to give more to church or charity, but are concerned about paying for care they may need in old age. Rightly so. This too is a good example of stewardship. To leave the church or other cause something in your will, to leave a legacy, is the perfect solution to this problem. People often don't like to talk or even think about their wills. I hope you have thought about it, because if there's one thing certain in life...! Or maybe it sounds morbid or gloomy to think about writing a will, but think of it rather as life-affirming. Even after you're gone you can be contributing to something that gives life, that builds community, that someone will be grateful for. And before I finish this little aside on legacies, do

you know about Will Aid? Every November many solicitors will work with you on your will at no charge, in exchange for a gift to one of a number of charities, of which Christian Aid is one. £85 is the recommended donation, but you can give any amount. £5 or £10 would be alright if that's all you can afford. It's a wonderful scheme and I have put copies of a list of four solicitors who take part in Will Aid on the table at the back of church, as well as a little booklet about legacies. There will also be a letter coming to you shortly from the churchwardens about planned giving and there is a box on this to tick if you would like to know more about legacies. (End of aside.)

I've mentioned Christian Aid, which is the UK churches' development agency, set up by us the church to focus on the central Christian responsibility to care for the poor. I hope there is little question that to support such work is fundamental to being a Christian. But what about giving to the church? Is that what God wants?

Let me answer that by looking at St. Andrew's Vision Statement, which has just two strands. Do you remember what they are? Our vision is (1) to be a people growing in a faith that is honest and life changing and (2) to be a centre for community at the heart of Caversham Heights.

Firstly, to be a people growing in faith: I think that comes back to what I said earlier about Jesus' answer to the question on paying taxes, which is that our faith underpins everything else. What's the value of supporting the church in a world where people are starving? Well, if there wasn't a church here we wouldn't even be sitting here thinking about God's call on our lives to care for the poor. If our faith is self-indulgent and leaves us all safely in our comfort zones, then I too would question whether it deserves a

penny of that money of which we are stewards. But if we dare, if we allow it to be honest and life-changing, then the church, even in Caversham Heights, can have an important role to play in the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. And the PCC will be focussing specifically on this area of our growing in faith at its next meeting, not just growing in knowledge but in lived faith—the difference between reading a book about how to drive a car and learning to drive. Growing as Christians, not merely in knowledge of Christianity.

On the second point ('a centre for community at the heart of Caversham Heights') we have been making some good progress recently, with the Fisherman café and the concerts, the most recent of which was here last night. Even in privileged Caversham Heights, there is a great need for community, for neighbourliness. And if we as a church can contribute to that, to bringing people together, we will, I think, be doing something significantly good. Imagine, wouldn't it be good for many more local people to just naturally see the church as the place where things are happening in the local community, coming and going for all sorts of different activities, bringing people together, a centre for community.

We have reasons to celebrate and be positive. Thankyou everyone for all you are already doing in the service of God's kingdom. Let us dare to give God that which is his, our very selves.